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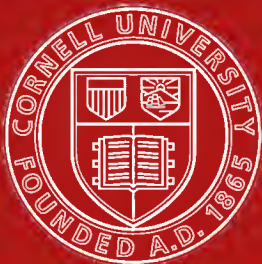
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HITCHIN PRIORY.

BY
REGINALD L. HINE.

CARLING & HALES, LTD., HITCHIN.

1918.

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Gift of Prof. John M.
Echols

To
CAPT. RALPH DELMÉ-RADCLIFFE.

*Non haec tibi legenda mandamus : satis
Ero beatus si modo ipsum lenibus
Amicus ocellis intuebris librum.*

HITCHIN PRIORY.

I.

If I were emulating Blomville's 14th century manuscript of the Priory, which in the year of Waterloo went to pieces between the clumsy fingers of William Dunnage, Postmaster and Antiquary of this town, I should no doubt be led back to the region of pure fable where all Carmelite historians begin. No chronicler of that time would have spared his readers the tale of Elijah, who, "under the ministry of angels," was ordained the first monk on that holy mountain with Jonah, Micah, and Obadiah for his first disciples. Nor the account of the philosopher Pythagoras, who, according to tradition, disputed on the same mountain with the prophet Daniel for thirty days and thirty nights over what was even then the thorny question of the Trinity. In due course the chroniclers used to touch ground about the year 1150, when Berthold, the Crusader, vowed in the thick of battle that if he came through alive and caused the infidels to fly he would serve thenceforth in the invisible army of Christ. After wandering through Calabria he came in extreme old age to Carmel, where, collecting a few hermits from the hills about, he founded beside the tomb of Elijah his order of Carmelites. I refrain, as Blomville assuredly would not have done, from setting out the sixteen articles of the Rule which Albert, Patriarch of Constantinople, a kinsman of Peter the Hermit, gave them, and which, being more than human flesh could endure, were relaxed by Innocent the Fourth in 1245. I also refrain from the whimsical and adventurous story, which tells how two English knights, John de Vesci and Richard de Grey, kidnapped a small number of these Carmelite recluses and brought them over-sea to found at Alnwick the first Carmelite priory in our country.

II.

But so far as Hitchin is concerned, the first solid footprints of history are placed in the year 1305. From near and far that autumn, devout people foregathered to the dedication of our Parish Church of St. Andrew, newly risen like the Phoenix from the ruin which fire and hurricane had caused. Amongst them, and most honoured of them all, came Richard Wellwin, Grand Prior of the English Carmelites, a Hertfordshire man, who loved our countryside and lingered here for the residue of his days. He died in 1309 and was buried in the North Chapel beneath the altar of St. Peter. There being no Carmelite house within the county, it is thought that he persuaded some of the wealthier sort to found one here at Hitchin. At any rate, within seven years of his translation the good work was commenced. By that time Edward II. was proposing to grant the Manor of Hitchin, forfeited sometime previously through the rebellion of John de Balliol, to Robert de Kenðdale, whose effigy lies to this day on a window sill in the north aisle of our Church. For the good of his soul the King wished to reserve a portion of the land for religious purposes, and asked for endowments to that end. Nor did he ask in vain. Though he left no boastful record for posterity to praise, and looked elsewhere for his reward, the foremost benefactor was undoubtedly John de Blomville, a man of wealth and family, and of letters too, for it is his history of the priory and parish of which we so bitterly mourn the loss. Only two fragments from its pages are preserved. Next in order, and allotted equal honour by our County Historians, was Adam le Rous (Adam Redhead). I suspect, however, that his grant to the King in 1317 of a house in Hitchin for the Carmelites to convert into a priory church was done less to the glory of God than for the safety of the donor's skin. For earlier in that same year he was arrested for a crime which would make the tenure of any property precarious to say the least. With a Canon and a Chantry Priest of our Parish Church and nine other wastrels he broke by broad daylight into a townsman's house, felled his trees, cut down his corn, comprehensively assaulted and beat his servants, and carried away six oxen and the very timbers of his house.

Meantime his brother had bolted with the parson's tithe and had wisely abjured the realm. Whether the red-headed Adam won the King's pardon by his pseudo-religious donation does not appear ; but it was a happy thought, and at all events the Priory reaped an advantage. The third and last benefaction, so far as real property went, was made some thirty-four years later, or rather promised, for John de Cobham, though speedy in the tongue, was very slow in the hand. Some of the four houses and six acres of land, which he obtained the King's license to assign to the Carmelites in 1351, were still in his own possession in 1375 ; and the Prior had the mortification of seeing the King's Officer seize the last portion through the license having lapsed. Meantime, in 1328, King Edward III. had come to Hitchin in the course of his royal progress,† had confirmed his father's grant and given the Carmelites leave to add his arms to their conventual seal. It is possible that he also endowed them with some of the seven other houses and four more acres of land which they are known later to have possessed. And the rest may have come in the year 1402, when the Prior obtained from the Holy See full remission of sins on the part of those who should make the friars any benefaction at the Feast of Pentecost.

III.

Such was the royal and rather meagre foundation of Hitchin Priory : a small huddle of buildings in Bridge Street and Tilehouse Street, which with some ingenious alterations and additions were constrained into the conventual plan and dedicated to the honour of "our alone Saviour and the Blessed Virgin Mary." Though only six arches of the original cloister arcade, moulded with double ogees and chamfers, survive, and though the Chapter Records seem to be irretrievably lost,* it is possible to reconstruct from the careful inventory of Henry VIII's Commissioners something of the general outline of the whole.

† With Wallingford, Abbot of St. Albans, who seems to have kept an unofficial wife in close seclusion here. She died three years later and is also buried in the North Chapel of our Church.

* Following a clue given me by Abbot, now Cardinal Gasquet, I am now having search made for them in Rome.

On the site of the house occupied by Mr. C. L. Barham in Bridge Street stood the timbered and tiled Gate House, which gave sole entry to the Priory and formed the porter's lodge.† By the left of this were three houses occupied by the lay-brethren, who did the menial work of the community. On the right stood the guest-house, a modest dwelling where only two might sleep; and having a little garden to itself, where a guest might labour if he pleased. Passing through the gate-house, the cobbled path-way led into a formal garden, out of which a visitor would turn to the right and discover a massive L-shaped building, or rather four buildings, under one roof, known as the "Owlde Halle." This was the mansion of Adam le Rous. Facing roughly north and south, the base of the letter was fully occupied by the Chapter-House, while the stem pointing due west enclosed the prior's lodging and "two lyttle chambers" for the friars, whose duty it was to serve him day and night. From the Owlde Halle going still westward one came into the cloister, of which the site can be more or less distinguished to this day. On its south side it was contained by the Priory Church, built fairly parallel with the street of clunch and flints, and having its roof tiled, no doubt from the kiln two hundred yards higher in the Tilehouse Street. From this again rose a steeple cased in lead, destined one day to go into the King's armoury for use in the wars with France. Within, the Church was comely with carven seats and wainscoat, some alabaster figures of the Saints, brasses and table tombs of deceased priors, and windows glorified with medieval glass. On its north side the cloister was bounded by the frater or refectory; on the east by the dormitory, and on the west by the cellarage, the kitchen, and the great barn for storing the friars' hay (the "hey house" as they called it). South-west of the church, and looking down the water-meadows towards Charlton were built the solar and scriptorium, where the brothers sunned themselves and studied—though,

† A secret passage led to the gate-house from the main Priory buildings, for use in dangerous times. Some Puritans, seeing the direction, have scandalously assumed that the passage proceeded to the nun's house at the Biggin, but it would puzzle them to prove it.

indeed, to study there must have been immensely hard. Just think of the temptation ! How pleasant to close the book and let the hours drift by dreaming over the pastures, full of sunlight, and sleepy kine and red sorrel as they are to-day. Through the oriel window of the great willow tree, how charming to follow the curves of the river backwards to its source, and mark the moorhen glide into the clumps of willow-herb, that goodly gift of God from which the brethren made a wonderful soup and a medicine against two and fifty ills. Once again, if a student were caught up in a thorny passage, he might seek inspiration up the little path left of the river, where the spring of holy water gushed from St. Winfred's well. Here in that crystal stream, what medicine for the mind ; what symbol of pellucidity of thought ! Still more alluring must have been the sight of the convent garden right below the solar ; three acres of rich soil, walled about for privacy and warmth. What child of man could resist the peaches ripening on the southern walls ? What friar could mark the fish-ponds at its side with the shoals of merry, monastic trout, gliding through the shallows, and return in peace of mind to the works of Thomas Aquinas ?

One other sequestered spot of this peaceful community must be remembered. It stood most southerly and distant of all. Through the convent garden you passed into one larger still (which the Prior sometimes let), and from that again you followed the path on the west bank of the river, till you came into what the friars called their grove ; a sort of temple made with trees ; pillared and girt round with two hundred goodly elms, as dark and secret as a druid's ring. Henry's Commissioners, it is true, thought but little of this grove, and valued the trees at only twopence a-piece ; but one may imagine how the brothers loved this woodland sanctuary. Here the Prior took his ease from the toils of discipline ; here on the cool grass the sun-scorched brethren rested at noon from getting in the hay ; and here at midnight one might sometimes have seen a friar flee from his demon-haunted cell to wrestle with God for the possession of his soul.

IV.

Such then was the home of the White-Carmelites of Hitchin, where they followed the three-fold rule of religion, learning and labour. It was, as one of their own writers said, the Creed of a lesser Trinity: contemplation for the soul: illumination for the mind: and some harmless distraction for Brother Ass the Body. Rising for prime at 5, they betook themselves to study or exercise till 8, when High Mass was said. At 10 one of the novices rang the convent bell, and the brothers filed into the one banquet of the day; itself another trinity of "*altum silentium*—perfect silence," while the refectory reading proceeded: "*clangor dentium*—crunching of the teeth," till the boards were cleared: and then at last "*rumor gentium*"—the buzzing of the brethren at their gossip, like a well-filled hive of bees. Thence through the cloisters to the cemetery to pray bareheaded for the souls of those, once their beloved companions, who had felicitously finished this life and lay there waiting a joyful resurrection; and so again to the scriptorium and their studies. Compline followed in the church at 3; a light meal of lettuce, cheese, and the famous Hitchin mead at 5; and an hour's audience later with their Prior in his lodging, or in the Chapter House. By seven all private devotions were said, and each friar asleep in his narrow, dormitory bed, till the bell "which rang ever at midnight" called him again to prayer. Thus the holy chain of worship and work was brought again full circle.

I have described only the common round, but in cases of special skill or special need some brethren would be otherwise employed. Those, for example, whose fingers were filled with the Holy Spirit would sit almost day-long in the scriptorium, copying some rare manuscript commentary of the Fathers or making an illuminated Psalter for the church. I have only lately brought two of their vellum sheets to light, hidden in the binding of a volume of his plays which the first Ralph Radcliffe (1509-1559) wrote with his own hand, and gave to Henry VIIIth.* The rest

* I traced this precious volume to the Library of Lord Harlech, who kindly let me keep it for some months. The plays were performed in the refectory, which Ralph Radcliffe, then a schoolmaster, turned into a theatre, so that his boys might learn more aptness and confidence in the English and Latin tongues.

no doubt followed the accustomed fate at the time of the dissolution, serving as jam-pot covers, patterns for tailor's suits, and stiffening for Puritan tracts. Some of the brethren, who had what Nero called "the face of a schoolmaster," would instruct the novices or promising lads from the town. Others would milk the cows, scour the pots and pans, and, so far as man may, would wrestle with the mysteries of the kitchen.† Others again would tend the kine, scythe the lawns, and root out the weeds which the Evil One sowed of nights in the convent garden. But the hand work was not large. The Carmelites were above all a contemplative order; and those who have seen them in their white cloaks, thrown over the heavy woollen habits, will not easily believe them capable of agricultural labour. Besides, the Hitchin Priory had only three acres of arable land, known as the "Cummin Field." What little corn they grew was ground at the King's Mill or that of the Knights of St. John, both situate at Charlton. The malt for their liquor, the wool for their habits, the leather for their sandals-thongs and books could be got plentifully from Hitchin market, then famous for all of these. About them on every hand, and blending with the sweet tones of the Priory bells, was "the noise of labour, the fulness of harvest, the creaking of loaded waggons, the bustle of farmyards, and the beating of the anvil on the forge," pictured so well in the homely lines of Francis Lucas:—

"Orchards well planted, stacks and mows,
And tillage-gear and brindled cows,
And sturks and colts and rude old sows,
Whose pigs rush everywhere."

But for good or ill *they* had chosen to dwell apart on the mountain of contemplation, to follow by austerity of discipline and solitary prayer the blessed example "of our alone Saviour"—a life more rigorous than farmyard work. To estimate its value is no concern of mine, for the spirit can be judged only by God, Who sends it. But here and there in our public records, enough of their

† I would commend anyone on this point to delight himself with the mischances of Brother Juniper, the self-appointed cook of his community, as related in the Little Flowers of St. Francis.

industry survives to disprove the oft-made accusation, that these servants of the Most High lived here in sluggish ease.

V.

On their bede-roll are some shining names, not only famous in their day and generation, but still remembered, though but faintly, in our own. To mention only a few, there was Brother Hugo, a very learned and illegible writer, whose mental activities remind one of Lydgate, his contemporary ; it was said that his collected works heaped up a waggon, that hardly two oxen could draw.†

Again, there was Thomas Walden (1377-1430) who, though not formally canonized, has always been reckoned amongst the saints of the Carmelite order. Born at Saffron Walden, he spent part of his youth here before proceeding to Oxford, and laid the foundation of that learning (*Doctor Authenticus* they styled him), which was to make him famous throughout Europe. Such was his power of persuasion and controversy (*Princeps Controversistarum*—another of his titles) before the Councils of Pisa and Constance in 1409 and 1415, that when the Provincial of the Carmelites died they appointed him to the office, though only 42 years of age. And such his knowledge and relentless activity where heresy was in question, that he was made Grand Inquisitor for England.* After a famous sermon at Paul's Cross, Walden was chosen by Henry Vth. to be his confessor, and afterwards entrusted with many matters of state. It was at his master's wish that he went in 1419 to make peace between the King of Poland and Michael, the Grand-master of the Teutonic Knights ; and it was in his arms in 1422 that Henry breathed his last. He preached the funeral sermon at Westminster on November the 6th that year. For the last eight years of his life, Walden served the young king, Henry VI. as tutor and father-confessor, and died upon a journey with him at Rouen in 1430 ; leaving, in spite of a stirring life, no less

† "He led an honest life," says Bale, "devoted to the arts and sought the light of truth in the midst of Egyptian darkness. He slept little at any time and never ceased to arouse the sleeping multitude of men by the power of his orations and night-thoughts. Even as a fish in a muddy stream, so he lived, yet preserved always the sweet flavour of piety. He died in 1340."

* He tells in his chronicle how, being at the trial of one, Taylor, for heresy, the latter outrageously declared that "a spider is more worthy of reverence than the Mass ; and straightway (says Walden) a great spider of horrid aspect came down from the roof by its very thread and sought to enter the mouth of the blasphemer. There was present Thomas, Duke of Exeter, then Chancellor of the Kingdom, who saw the prodigy."

than fifty-one works, some of ten or twelve books each, to serve for a lasting monument. His *Doctrinale* and his collection of documents relating to the early Lollards are read as classics to this day.

Finally, there was Peter Stokes, whose Carmelite contemplations led on to worldly disputations, and almost won him a martyr's crown. The story of his life is told rather prettily by John Bale, himself a Carmelite, though he renounced his vows "for love of his sweet Dorothy." It seems that after years of preparation in Hitchin Priory, Brother Peter packed up his best theses and rode away to Oxford in 1382, "aspiring to the degree of Doctor of Divinity." Incidentally he wanted to have a fling at the Lollards, whose intellectual home was there. Already he was well-known to them, for he had preached fifty sermons against them, and Wiclif himself had nick-named him "the little white dog," because he barked and worried at them incessantly in his books. So when Peter stood up in the Senate at Oxford and claimed his degree, there was a most disorderly scene. The Lollards, led by Nicholas of Hereford, and backed by Rigge, the Chancellor of the University, shouted him down and tried to stir up an insurrection. In an interval of comparative quiet, Peter produced a complete list of their heresies, which he had got a scrivener beforehand to write out, and declaimed it at full voice. Then one, Crumpe, continued the battle on his side; a cantankerous Irishman and something of a Cistercian, though not much. Bale calls him "a master of fallacies, a false priest, a weeping fox, a wine-bibbing enemy of the Lord," and so on.) Between them they created such a tumult that Crumpe was suspended and Peter's doctorate was disallowed. Nothing daunted, however, they set out for London, shewed their grievances to Archbishop Courtenay, and the King's Council, and returned "like Saul, the fierce, armed with royal authority" and general warrants against all the Lollards. That very day, Nicholas of Hereford, the Arch-Lollard, was preaching the University Sermon, but Peter "durst not for his life" stop his mouth with the Archbishop's edict, because the Chancellor had packed the church with two hundred of his soldiers. Next day, however,

he had a public debate with Repingdon, another ring-leader, and was putting him to confusion when twelve students came in, displaying armour and weapons beneath their gowns. Then for the second time the little white dog turned tail and fled ("otherwise," he says to the Archbishop, "I should have been murdered in my chair"), this time back to his kennel at Hitchin, leaving the Archbishop and twenty divines to stamp out the conflagration he had caused. The rest of his life he passed peacefully at Hitchin, completing a treatise on the Superior Clergy, some translations of Holy Writ into the vulgar tongue, and some lively pamphlets against those who had deprived him of his degree. In the year 1399, he "closed his last day," and was buried in his robe and scapulary, a garment so sacred that the Virgin Mary had promised to visit purgatory for the relief of those who had worn it.

VI.

As with most of the religious orders in England, the decline set in about the close of the 15th century. By that time the fervour of the wonderful 14th century was spent. The Wars of the Roses had set men murmuring at the futility of the Faith. First John Ball, and then the Lollards, had preached against the pride and privilege of the clergy. In this county especially the Lollards had been strong. Moreover, the immorality of the mendicants had made the name of "friar" stink in the nostrils of the nation. The common people—already aware of their coming independence—preferred to give their money to the guilds which they managed for themselves, or to found chantries where their names might be more exalted. For a time the brethren were saved the pinch of poverty, though that, indeed, should not have troubled their ascetic order. There were yet in Hitchin a number of people—chiefly widows and old men of the devouter sort—to befriend them in their need. No more lands and tenements came their way, but the bequests of money were still frequent. In 1509 John Middleton gave them £6 13s. 4d. (worth £100 of our money) "to keep an yerely obit or anniversary solempenely by note for my soule," and forty shillings more "to the reparacion of the church of

the said Freres and of the housyng thereto belonging." Seventeen years before, Sir John Sturgeon,* the King's Munitioner and a terrible profiteer (twice convicted) bribed them with 13/4 "to pray for my soul and for that of Edward IV."; rather poor payment for two such inveterate sinners. From Edward Moody (1504), whose son twenty years after saved the great despoiler's life when he fell head-first into the Hiz, they received two quarters of malt; and from another cheery soul they had a butt of red Gascony wine. Sometimes the gifts were personal, as in 1501, when the Widow Drake not only gave £6 13s. 4d. "of good money" to the "House of Friars," but 20s. to Sir John Durrant, the then Prior, and 40s. to "Frier Plummer," her favorite. Even with these doles, which could be multiplied by ten, the Prior could not make ends meet. On the 17th October, 1508, the nine brethren who were left, sorrowfully signed away the convent garden for the space of 99 years; and little dreaming of their fate, gave the usual covenant for quiet enjoyment. The grant is counter-signed by Robert Love, the Provincial of the English Carmelites, who also sprang from Hitchin. Two other benefactors should be named. On September 3rd, 1530, King Harry was staying as usual at Moormead in the hunting season; being told of their distress he sent 40s. to the friars, whom so soon he was going to dissolve. Of the last benefaction in 1531 the original acknowledgment survives; a precious document, more lovely in its phrasing than any I have seen, and reflecting a beauty of holiness which shone not seldom in the hearts of these Carmelite friars. I ask no apology for transcribing it in full. "Friar John Butler, local Prior and servant of the Brethren of the Order of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, of Mount Carmel in the Convent of Hitchin to our well-beloved in Christ John Rogmer and Anne his wife Greeting, and wishing them to merit heavenly kingdoms by the assistance of prayers. We most diligently observing and commending in the Lord the sincere devotion which you have to our order for the reverence of Christ and the blessed glorious Virgin Mary by whose title our said order is more particularly distinguished and with respect to those things especially which regard the health

* His carven tomb lies in fragments behind the altar of our Trinity Chapel, and really ought to be pieced together and set up in the Church.

of souls, as far as we can with God, we desire to repay you a good office. Therefore by these presents we grant you perpetual participation (as well during life as after death) in all the Masses, Fasts, Vigils, Prayers, Preachings, Abstinences and all other good works which the clemency of our Saviour shall mercifully vouchsafe to be performed by our brethren in the said Convent. Adding moreover and granting of our special grace, that when the memory of our obits shall be recited in our Conventual Chapter, the same shall be done for you in every respect which is commonly accustomed to be done for the deceased brethren of our Order. In Witness whereof the seal of my office of Prior is annexed to these presents. Given in our Council aforesaid Anno Domini 1531." To dwell on such a document is a danger. It puts a man out of love with his own day. It makes him heart-sick for that something in the world which is no longer to be found.

VII.

It was just three years later that the first blow fell ; and to the friars it was by no means unexpected. They had known some time that the King's blind lust would overturn the world. They were soon to watch with envy the magnificent courage and martyrdom of the Blessed More and the Carthusians of London. With envy, I say, for they had received secret orders from their own Provincial to seek no crown of martyrdom, but to be obedient to the King.* On the 5th May, 1534, the King's Messenger rode through the gate-house and summoned the brothers to take the Oath of Supremacy. It was a lengthy document to which he had that same morning obtained the signatures of the Priors of King's Langley, Aylesbury, Dunstable and Bedford, and was still to carry to the Franciscans of More—no mean feat of horsemanship and persuasion for one day. The document, as the historian Burnet noted, is a priceless relic, because in Mary's reign (1557), Bishop Bonner had a commission to collect and destroy all writings in contempt of the Holy See, and did his work so thoroughly that this

* John Bird, the last Provincial, played a sorry if not a craven part; and so pleased the King with his course of sermons against the Pope's Supremacy that he was appointed the first bishop of the new diocese of Chester.

sex-partite oath is the last but one that survives. In brief, John Butler, on behalf of Hitchin Priory, "professed, testified and vowed to perform entire, inviolate and constant faith, respect and obedience towards his lord, King Henry VIII., and towards his most serene consort, Queen Anne, and towards the holy and pure matrimony lately contracted, done and consummated between them. Also to account the Bishop of Rome, who in his bulls usurps the name of Pope and arrogates to himself the dignity of High Priest of no greater authority than any other bishop in England." With a touch of irony the form concludes by stating that the Prior "subscribed not by compulsion but by choice."

Another five years of prayer and intercession, five anxious, interminable years, each day dreading what the next might bring, each day's sky more ominous than the last, with clouds mustering for the final storm. Then, as if with a flash of lightning, they found that all the time they had been harbouring an Iscariot in their midst. Their own tenant, Thomas Parys, was in the pay of Cromwell, singled out in the Secret Service to inform against the friars, and to invent immoralities where otherwise no information could be laid. Through the State Papers one can follow him almost daily, spying treacherously into the convents of every county, signing his reports "Your assuryd beydesman and servant," and closing each with a petition for the spoil, like a hungry jackal picking the friar's bones. It was he who, finding nothing else to lay against his landlords, suggested to Secretary Wriothesley that he should examine Prior Dove, of the Calais Carmelites, who had as a young man served some years in this community. Accordingly some twenty-three searching questions were sent over the water, and evidence taken on commission; the main point being to prove that Dove had attended the sermons of one Damplip (a rather appropriate name for a frothy, rhetorical preacher) "who came lately out of Germany."* This having

* Amongst other wild things, this preacher said of the sacrament of the altar, "It is not in a knave priest to make God," and of the miracle of the mass, "A mouse would as soon eat the body of God as any other cake." For such sayings he was put to death, but not before he had set Cranmer against Cromwell, and almost lost Calais by constant insurrection.

failed, Parys, who badly wanted some of the Priory property, and subsequently stole it, dropped his wiliness and tried a bolder stroke. He told Cromwell that "Hitchen was amongst those few houses of friars which have any substance of lead." That sort of ponderous and metallic argument was far more likely to move Cromwell, for, as one of our Priory papers bitterly remarks, he was merely a blacksmith's son.

VIII.

On the 16th October, 1539, Sir William Coffyn* and Henry Crouch, two more of Cromwell's minions, entered the Priory, summoned a chapter-meeting of the brothers, now reduced to five, and shewed them the commission of their master. There it was, fresh from the Palace of Westminster the day before, signed by Thomas Crumbwell (*sic*), and sealed with the Privy Seal. After impudently reciting that "the house of the White Friars within our town of Hytching remayneth at this present in such state that it is neyther used to the honour of God or the benefite of our common wealth" the document naively announced that the King "mynded for the conversion of it to another purpose, to take it into our hands," and then gave the usual directions as to the form of the surrender. At the request of the Prior a day's grace was allowed; and that evening the last mass was sung, the Prior's last blessing given, and the last prayers said in the cemetery for the souls of the departed. It would need a reverend and tender pen to tell the hours of that night. By the morning the Prior had with his own hands written out the deed of surrender as we see it to this day, in sentences very different from Cromwell's brutal style, and even wishing "to the most excellent King Henry and to all the faithful in Christ salvation in the Everlasting Lord." At the foot and beneath their prior's hand four of the brethren signed; but

* In the State Papers he is called "a very gentleman"; but the same volumes charge him with "withholding a lady's hawk, a poor man's riding saddle," and a large landed estate which he retained by bribing the judges with two casks of wine. Also he "made privy labour to be of the Order of the Garter, and would give much money to have it." He won his knighthood for his services in helping to suppress the Lincolnshire rebellion.

the fifth, Alexander Sandye, after writing his christian name, repented of the deed and struck the pen firmly through—the act of a brave man, for it must have lost him his liberty if not his life. Then the Priory seal was affixed for the last time,* and the piety and humble endeavour of 222 years brought utterly to an end. To the friars, in spite of their outward submission, it must have seemed as though Anti-Christ had come ; as it did to their brothers in distress at Royston Priory, who gathered in one of the inns and signed the weird prophecy, “ that the kyng shall not lyve a month after the feast of the nativite of Saynt John Baptiste except he do amende his condicions ; and further that after the said tyme an horse of Xs price shalbe able to bear all the noble bloode of England.” Here there was no such idle beating of the air, for the life of contemplation makes the buffets of this world a little matter beside the immanence of God. At the same time a curious retribution does seem to have fallen upon the three main agents concerned in the ruin of our Priory. In less than two months Sir Wm. Coffyn paid the penalty of a mortal and sinful man. His widow begged Cromwell to tell the King that “ he died of the great sickness, full of God’s marks over all his body.” The following year Parys was deserted by his wife, and by her attainder in 1542 lost all her fortune of lands, chattels and 1,500 sheep. As for Crouch, he made a miserable muddle of his after life, fell into hopeless arrears with the King’s money, and was finally despatched by the Privy Council.

The next day, so instant was the King’s command, the brothers went out into the inhospitable world ; I had almost said “ into the everlasting night,” for not a vestige of their fate remains. A kindlier fortune fell to Prior Butler, for a Chantry Priest of the Parish Church had lately died, and the guild or brotherhood of St. Mary, in whose gift it was, graciously offered the vacancy to him. In the Chantry certificate of 1547, we catch the last glimpse of him,

* Two kneeling friars beneath the figure of the Blessed Virgin and the Child. In the field on either side of her a flowering branch. Right and left the shields of Edward the Second and Edward the Third. The matrix of the seal of the 15th century circular form is still at the Priory in the careful keeping of the Radcliffe family. An illustration of the Seal is shewn at the end of this history.

“an old man of sixty years with no other living but the service of the Fraternity, namely, vi^l. xiii^s. iiij^d. I have seen one petition of his to Thomas Cromwell a year or two before, “begging your Lordship’s goodness to consider my grievous sorrows,” but nothing came of it, nor any pension till 1553, when the old faith was restored.

The moment the friars were gone, Coffyn and Crouche (again what appropriate names for these human vultures) stripped the lead, bells and glass from the Priory Church, so that the steeple crashed through the timbered roof and, amongst other damage, “foure lyttle graven-stones were brused and broken.” To the informer Parys, were given the Friars’ Grove, some ruinous buildings for the enlargement of his house, and all the “plate, jewelles, ornaments, copes and other implements.” These last, however, were in trust for the King, to be sold by auction and the proceeds entered in a Book of Remembrance and paid to the Court of Augmentation. But though I have made diligent search I cannot trace the “accomplysshement of his Accomptes,” which Parys promised for the “iiiiith day of next terme.” It is a pity, for it still further darkens his character, and deprives us of much detail of the goods and chattels of the friars and the interior of their church.

IX.

For seven years the Priory lay desolate, and its buildings fell into extreme decay. Most pathetic reading is the inventory of its condition by “xii. honeste, dyscrete and most substancyall menne of the parisshe of Hychen,” in 1546, when two court-sychophants and land-jobbers, Herdson and Watson, purchased of the King.* “All the buyldinges are verrye Ruynowce both in tymber and tyle for lack of Reparacions, insomuch that sutch as hath any estate of them hath forfeited theire leases, openly affyrmyng that they had

* The twelve good men and true found the Priory to be worth only £5 18s. 0d. by the year. Dugdale gives the value at suppression at £13 14s. 0d. Nothing seems to be known of Watson, but Herdson was a skinner by trade and reputation. He was the same year appointed comptroller of the King’s Customs and Subsidies in the Port of London. He and Watson gave the King £1,641 for the Priory and other lands, and made huge profits by selling in small lots.

rather forgowe their interest thereof than occupy according to their covenants to repayre. As for the gardens they are but as yarges and voyde places of groundes; nevertheless foreasmuche as thei have in auntyent tyme-past born the name of garden plottes we have charged and entered them as sutchē." They report the mansion house in good repaire for the reason that Ralph Radcliffe, a poor schoolmaster, playwright and scholar of Jesus College, Cambridge, had for some years lived there and started a private school. Though of noble family and acquainted with the King, it is due solely to his own brains and hard work that he was able two years later (1548) to buy the estate and afterwards add acre to acre as his pupils increased.*

If I were asked by a stranger where the old Priory was, I should wave my arms wide over all the town. In the present mansion, built by John Radcliffe, a merchant-adventurer of Aleppo, Smyrna and Bagdad, about the year 1775, there is little old work to show.† But between 1539 and 1546 the old Priory was used as a quarry for the town. Anyone then building a new house took his carts that way. So in the Cock Hotel, in the old Red Lion, in the gabled house by the Exchange Yard destroyed in 1899, and in the timbered shop at the south entry to the church, there is or was whole tons of carved or moulded stone. So, too, if we did but know it in a hundred houses more; their faces may be Georgian, but their hearts are Tudor to the core. It is scarcely too fanciful to say that though the friars and their faith may be forgotten, their "works" still uphold our town!

Be it tempting as it may, it is not for the historian to moralise on "the old, far-off, unhappy things" of centuries ago. I have heard some good folk bring against the friars that same terrible indictment, which the poet Verhaeren put into the mouth of Christ himself:—

* I am often informed that the original grant was to the Radcliffes, and that being in possession of "Priory" lands they suffered the usual punishment in failure of male issue. Neither statement is true. They bought for good money of the original grantees, and have enjoyed the normal run of straight successions. It was not till late in the 18th century that the male line became extinct.

† Apart from the six arches of the cloister arcade I named before. The stone of the present south front was quarried from Highdown.

“ You rot in torpid ease
Behind a sleepy world of pieties,
Drowning the slow, monotonous hours away,
You sluggardize. Far off the trumpets blow
War on my cross, whose wide arms long ago
Embraced the world and pressed it to my heart ;
You play an ever-shrinking, sterile part,
You stifle boundless ardours, virgin powers,
The tongues of flame, which on my faithful few
At Pentecost descended.”

There are those on the other hand who say that the heart of England will never be whole again till the old order is restored. But the student of history, for all his reverence to the past, cannot fail to see the gradual evolution and amelioration of the human lot. There is nothing steady in one stay. Though it move slowly like the river Hiz, yet the world moves on. The only hope for man is to take the old stones and build anew after a better fashion. “ Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul.” It were a child’s part, or a poet’s merely, to weep because here not one stone lieth on another, because instead of the Friar’s Grove the nettles flourish in thousands, because of all the former sanctity and splendour only a fragile memory plays over a fleeting stream,

“ Whose harmless fish monastic silence keep.”



